

February 25, 2023

In support of SB 1095: AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

Dear Chairs Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, and members of the housing committee:

My name is Tenille, Bonilla, and I am a Justice Advisor at the Connecticut Justice Alliance. I am writing this testimony to communicate my strong support for Bill SB 1095. The CTJA is a statewide youth-adult partnership working to end the criminalization of youth. The Alliance includes Justice Staff, Justice Advisors, and Steering Committee members, which include lawyers, researchers, clinicians, and social workers, who work across issues areas such as mental/behavioral health, family advocacy, substance abuse, youth services, LGBTQ+ issues, legal representation, education, community and residential services, and public policy reform.

As a student, the purpose of school is for education. Right? Yet we fail to remember sometimes just how much time young people spend with in these schools. Time that should be contributing to the progress of a students knowledge, personality, and dreams in all positive ways.

Unfortunately for some, they're instead met with the feeling of fear and worry as they walk through the doors and see that police officer in the hallway. As they walk through the doors of a place where they should feel safe, secure, and trusting in the adults and relationships around them; they instead feel nervousness for the days outcome, and most of the time not fully protected.

It is widely recognized that the purpose of SRO's is to ensure a safe learning environment, and I am very sure that many adults believe they are doing just that; which includes being of assistance during a crisis (i.e. school shooting). However they have been statistically proven not to contribute to the prevention of any school shootings across the country, and have actually instead contributed to the spike of school based arrest, especially for black and brown youth. From 1975 to 2018 the amount of schools that have an SRO on site went from 1% to 58%, and has in turn made it 3x more likely for students to be arrested in schools with SRO's - 5x more likely now for black and brown youth.

Schools have created the tendency and habit, of over relying on police for situations that should most often be handled by professionals trained for said situations. Professionals such as guidance counselors, social workers, more nurses, mental health service providers etc. It's important that if we continue to keep SRO's in our schools that we are intentional about the training that they receive and understanding they have pertaining their role as an officer; but it is simultaneously important that we bring more of these trained professionals into the schools and allow them to do what they know how. Doing this can create better relationships between the adults and students, create a better understanding of reliance between teachers and officers, and all in all will benefit the decrease in school based arrest that more often than not contribute to a young person becoming apart of the school to prison pipeline.

We are trying to keep our young people safe and instead have influenced mass incarceration not only in this state, but around the country. It's evident now more than ever the need for reallocating the millions of dollars that go towards CT police, and it's significant we use that to support the PROPER training of SRO's as well as the introduction of other professionals to better fit that role. As well as recognizing the benefit of providing wrap around services for students, especially with in urban communities. Now is the time to build a system that 100% centers and supports the safety of young people in every community.

Thank you for reading my testimony,
Tenille Bonilla